

Miscellanea

The Origin of *Banisteria* and the Virginia Natural History Society

The Virginia Natural History Society and its journal *Banisteria* had its roots in discussions of the role of natural history in academic institutions. A trend that developed in the 1980s in Virginia colleges and universities, indeed in many such institutions in the United States, was away from organismal biology and toward those disciplines which examined molecular and cellular processes. Two attitudes on the part of administrators and some biologists seemed prevalent: (1) that the study of the parts of an organism was more important than the study of the whole organism and the context in which it lives, and (2) that the use of high-tech instruments in the laboratory was more alluring to students than field biology. Many with whom I talked lamented the continual loss of organismal courses, such as mammalogy, herpetology, and those in other disciplines. Such courses taught by older faculty were, and continue to be, dropped when these professors retired.

In addition, the increasing emphasis on university researchers having to successfully acquire grants with overhead funds in order to receive promotion and tenure placed additional significance on laboratory and high-tech studies. Grants for high-tech research frequently have overhead costs included, whereas only infrequently are overhead costs part of field-oriented grants. Further, overhead is seldom a part of grants in the growing field of conservation biology. Hence, my concerns were fueled by the change in focus in institutions of higher learning and the attitudes on the part of an increasing number of administrators and academic scientists that the study of natural history was old fashioned and "unscientific."

Journals that once devoted space to natural history have increasingly turned down such contributions, one, because of the attitudes about what constitutes scientific advancement and two, because of the high costs of publication. The number of workers in many disciplines has increased and journal space is more and more devoted to papers addressing broad questions. There are few publications available for natural history manuscripts. Many of my colleagues have become increasingly concerned that natural history data and observations useful to land managers and conservation biologists have become increasingly difficult to publish. But the only permanent way for information to be accessible to those needing it is via publications.

The *Virginia Journal of Science* has been, in general, an exception to the above attitudes and restrictions. However, this journal has historically published the results of specific studies and the occasional natural history observation. With the exception of several natural history-oriented symposia published between 1987 and 1991, the emphasis seemed to be placed on papers and symposia dealing with subjects other than natural history and organismal biology. I found it frustrating to have to wade through papers on unrelated subjects in order to find papers on natural history topics. A forum in which to interact with other people interested in natural history for its own sake was also lacking.

Finally, I had experienced a number of instances where useful natural history data and observations were in danger of being lost forever had I not salvaged them. There are many useful records and data in the drawers and files of scientists and laypersons that will never be available to people who would find them useful unless there is a means of bringing them out. I envisioned a mechanism that would make hidden but useful information permanently available to the rest of us and to history. And, I envisioned a means by which natural history papers would not have to compete for publication space.

Discussions over 1987-1991 with other biologists sharing similar concerns, particularly R. L. Hoffman, C. B. Knisley and T. F. Wieboldt, and several lay persons interested in natural history, led me to conceive of a state-level journal that would serve as an outlet for a wide range of natural history observations derived from research conducted in Virginia. In 1991, I asked Richard L. Hoffman to join me on this project. It was he who suggested the name *Banisteria* for the journal.

We subsequently asked colleagues whether they would contribute papers to such a journal. The reception was encouraging and at the 1991 meetings of the Virginia Academy of Science at VPI&SU, we passed out the first announcement and solicited financial contributions. The results confirmed our original perception, as 14 people and a local chapter of a national professional society contributed money directly to me to help start *Banisteria*. The society was only an idea at the time. Several colleagues subsequently contributed manuscripts and R. L. Hoffman and I wrote or helped to write several others. Each manuscript was reviewed by at least one colleague other than Hoffman and me. The first issue of *Banisteria* was finally published on 13 November 1992 with the help of Rick Boland of the Virginia Museum of

Natural History. It contained 10 papers dealing with various aspects of the natural history of the Commonwealth.

The Virginia Natural History Society (VNHS) was established after the seminal publication of *Banisteria*. It had quickly become apparent that we needed an umbrella organization. Several of our colleagues became enthusiastic about a society devoted to natural history and saw the value in offering a forum to both academic natural historians and lay persons. Thus, Michael Kosztarab agreed to be the society's first President, Barry Knisley the first Vice-President, and Anne Lund the Secretary/Treasurer. These officers have taken the initiative and have formed a solid foundation for the future development of the VNHS.

The first public organizational meeting of the VNHS was on 20 May 1993 at the annual meeting of the Virginia Academy of Science in Norfolk. It was there we ratified the Constitution, officially elected the officers (as noted above, plus three Councilors), and inaugurated the Virginia Natural History Society.

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Message from the President

This is my first chance to greet all members of The Virginia Natural History Society before the closing of the first successful year. We have made excellent progress.

Anne C. Lund, our Secretary-Treasurer, reported that our fiscal affairs are in order and that the membership is around 130 at present. Thanks to the diligent work of our two editors, Joseph C. Mitchell and Richard L. Hoffman, and the enthusiastic support from members, the first issue of *Banisteria* was well-received. A number of institutions have already subscribed to it. The second issue will be even broader in coverage of topics than the first one and longer. We are also including in this issue some space devoted to Society business. All of these cost the Society extra money, thus the reason to increase yearly dues and subscription rates. These changes were approved by the Executive Committee during our meeting of May 1, 1993.

The enclosed Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws of the Society, prepared by C. Barry Knisley, were adopted at our Norfolk meeting on May 20, 1993. As you may

have noticed, we expanded our membership categories. Also, the Executive Committee was enlarged with the addition of three Councilors. They include Richard J. Neves, Thomas J. Rawinski, and Carolyn Wells.

On August 5, we organized a successful field trip to some mountain tops in southwestern Virginia, concentrating on grass-feeding small invertebrates. These were just a few of the many activities of the Society this past year, and we hope to expand further our activities next year. Your suggestions will be appreciated.

The members of the Executive Committee join me in expressing our thanks for your support. We are all looking forward to another successful year.

Michael Kosztarab
President, VNHS

Announcements

1. The First Annual Meeting of the Virginia Natural History Society will be held on 19-20 May 1994 at James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA in conjunction with the Virginia Academy of Science. The VNHS will organize a new section entitled "Biodiversity and Natural History."

Members and others wishing to present papers in this section should send their titles (only) to the Section Secretary (and VNHS Vice-President) Dr. C. Barry Knisley, Dept. of Biology, Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, VA 23005 by 1 February 1994. Additional information about the meeting may be obtained from the Virginia Academy of Science, Dept. of Biology, University of Richmond, VA 23173.

2. The Virginia State Library and Archives will present "All the Ornaments of Nature," a chronological journey through its collections of visual and literary observations of Virginia's flora and fauna. The exhibition will feature writings and illustrations of about forty 16th to 20th century artists and natural scientists, including John Banister, Mark Catesby, John Clayton, and John J. Aududon. The exhibition will run from 12 October to 20 December 1993. Additional information may be obtained by calling Janice Hathcock (804-786-7133) or Suzanne Arnold (804-786-2311), or by writing the Virginia State Library and Archives, 11th Street at Capitol Square, Richmond, VA 23219-3491.